HAWORTH

The Virtual New-Hire Experience

December 2020

Attraction & Retention During COVID-19

> "Since there are no person-to-person conversations going on, you don't have awareness of conversations and what you could or should be involved in."

Millennial, manufacturing industry

A well-run work-from-anywhere program recognizes the full breadth of benefits and challenges faced by remote workers—particularly new hires onboarding virtually. This awareness is key to getting new people engaged quickly and fully within the organization and its culture. When done well, the virtual new-hire process improves attraction and retention rates. Investing in social capital will get your organization there.

The Importance of Social Capital Found in Culture

Social capital is a resource that exists in the relationships among members of a social network. It is aided through the obligations, expectations, and trust in the network structure; the information shared; and the norms that manage the network.[1] Social capital is how people get things done together. The payoff for organizations is that the social capital resources employees develop at work provide the organization with what it seeks—outcomes from their knowledge sharing such as intellectual capital and innovation.[2] As one may imagine, organizational culture can have a tremendous impact on the way people's social connections are created, maintained, and used to create value for the organization. The quote above, however, highlights one of the biggest challenges of remote work—the lack of organic in-person conversations.

The Question

Since social capital is the grease in coordinated efforts to bring about desired organizational outcomes, we investigated the challenges and benefits of virtual (or remote) onboarding and retaining new employees. We wanted to answer the question:

What does it look like to build social capital virtually for new hires?

The Answer

In short, to attract and retain virtual new hires, the organization must meet the new hires' challenges and foster inherent benefits of remote onboarding and working. This objective will involve adjusted expectations and expanded tactics to build necessary social capital. Simultaneously, the organization would be wise to use the opportunity for the improvement of individual performance when working remotely.
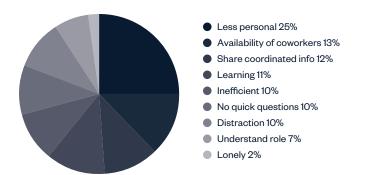
> "For companies: Pay attention to onboarding and culture. These are important during these times. [My] company recognized that in order to do it right, they needed to extend onboarding out an extra 1.5 weeks, which was the right thing to do."

Millennial, technology industry

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1.   Coleman, 1988.   2.   Dalkir, 2005.

Challenges

Ten themes emerged as challenges for a virtual new hire. Some themes are obvious, and many are interrelated.

Challenge Themes

- Less personal 25%
- Availability of coworkers 13%
- Share coordinated info 12%
- Learning 11%
- Inefficient 10%
- No quick questions 10%
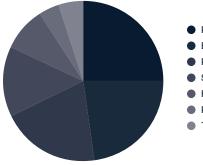- Distraction 10%
- Understand role 7%
- Lonely 2%

As somewhat expected, challenges for virtual new hires arose in the extra effort expended or needed to work collaboratively, get to know colleagues, and learn. Onboarding virtually doesn't work well when using in-person onboarding practices that haven't been adapted for a remote experience; it is difficult to know how and where to get needed resources (from others). Compounding this challenge is the extra work required to coordinate efforts with colleagues—often using different technologies to do so.

While technology can bridge the physical distance among colleagues, it's not the same as interacting face-to-face. Some of the negative experiences that come out of virtual interactions can be found in not accounting for the fatigue from always being connected, via video conferencing or otherwise, for extended periods of time. Exhaustion could curb learning and engagement for new hires.

Benefits

Seven themes emerged as benefits for a virtual new hire. There were both expected and unexpected themes, from the ability to recharge more easily to leveraging the efficiency of formal means of communication.

Benefit Themes

- Productive focused work 25%
- Easier recharging 23%
- Personal efficiencies 20%
- Support 14%
- Formal communication channels 9%
- Professional growth 4%
- Transparency 5%

"[I liked] the ability to take mental breaks during the day, the ability to go on my back deck, get outside, work in different environments, and unwind more."

Generation X, manufacturing industry

Benefits for virtual new hires are apparent in terms of their individual job responsibilities and personal gains. Individual performance improves with increased efficiency for their individual work. And, these are possible with the autonomy so often found in working remotely.

Build Social Capital for Virtual New Hires

When organizations address these challenges and foster the benefits, they're investing in the social capital necessary for these new employees to thrive. Interviewees described that their organizations do this well when they intentionally create a constructive team culture, have clear expectations and ways to enlist help, and foster trust in colleagues and leadership.

Bridge the Gap: Address Challenges

Building rapport with colleagues and managers virtually is paramount. Providing multiple channels for informal and formal communication is essential, but must be deployed effectively by managers and groups. While virtual new hires are already primed to learn new ways of doing things, don't assume that they will automatically pick up on norms for building rapport while working virtually.

Be explicit about when to use formal and informal channels and plan for building in regular social opportunities. Timely and consistent positive affirmations and feedback let new hires know whether they're on the right track or not and tell them they're not alone.

"One thing that's been very beneficial is using the chat medium to get positive affirmations. Managers give shout-outs in different communication channels, and this has been really helpful when you're alone at your computer all day and may feel lonely at times."

Millennial, healthcare industry

While building rapport can be more fluid, having clear objectives and processes are key to new hires' success. Transparency is important.

> "Everyone is working on daily stuff behind their own screen. Communication needs to be even more clear in a digital space than it was before because conversations don't happen organically."

Millennial, manufacturing industry

Take the time to check their understanding and provide consistent processes and access to necessary tools. Then, let new hires do their work, which builds on their individual benefits.

Building on Benefits

The benefits to individual performance and well-being can be largely attributed to autonomy and efficiencies while working remotely. Once new hires have a clear understanding of what is expected of them and are connected to colleagues, many take advantage of having more flexibility, fewer disruptions, and ease of recharging, with the caveat that their environment is distraction-free and responsibilities allow for the flexibility.

> "My team has been very flexible and patient with new hires asking questions, and they have encouraged open communication. My manager is quite flexible with their communication style, but also lets me structure my days to best fit my schedule and needs."

Millennial, healthcare industry

It's important to routinely gauge how much structure new hires need. Build the scaffolding essential for them to succeed and give them the choice of how much of it they need and when to use it. When this strategy is coupled with clear expectations and rapport building, it's much easier to foster trust in new hires and their choices.

Key Takeaways
Adjust Expectations & Expand Tactics
- Clearly define roles, responsibilities, and effective processes to provide structure for new hires to succeed. Clarity in a virtual environment is highly important, as it is inefficient and more difficult to "just ask" when more information is needed.
- Frequent affirmation and feedback from managers and colleagues are essential for learning and feeling connected.
- Build in additional appropriate ways—informal and formal—for coworkers to connect, learn, and foster trust amongst each other.

Benefits of virtual onboarding and working are largely personal and seen in efficiency and flexibility. The organization receives the outcome of these personal benefits in the form of improved individual performance. Investing in social capital eases the challenges of being a virtual new hire while capitalizing on the benefits of remote work.

Eventually Entering the Workplace
When new hires join the rest of the workforce in the workplace, it will be important to continue investing in social capital. Consider the role of organizational culture and how the workplace will anchor employees' work experiences, regardless of how often and when they come to the office.

Consider how workplace policies and remote work policies reflect each other.
What resources will/can you provide new hires once they arrive on-site? Specialized tools? Schedule flexibility? Space variety and choice? Control over their work environment?

Work to make virtual and in-person experiences congruent.
Do your virtual onboarding outcomes provide a seamless transition for when new hires eventually work in-person? What's missing?

The built environment of the workplace will give employees cues.
What virtual work behaviors do you want to carry over into the workplace in terms of individual performance and collaboration with colleagues? What new behaviors do you want to encourage?

Considering these issues and investing in virtual social capital can ease the remote onboarding process—and get new employees off to a good start.

The Study

Who & How

We conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with eight new hires—who self-identified as female (3) and male (5)—from finance, manufacturing, food/beverage, technology, government, and healthcare industries. Their roles were in finance, sales, development operations, information technology, technology, and a government bureau. They also represented three generations: Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. Five interviewees worked solely remotely, two experienced remote and onsite locations, and one started remotely but worked fully on-site at the time of the interview. The duration of employment for all ranged from four to 24 weeks.

Sample Theme Responses

Analysis

All responses were separated from interview notes. Data was then anonymized. A second copy of the anonymized data was created, and responses were then randomly reordered so each response could be analyzed as a stand-alone piece of data. The data was reviewed to find themes/key characteristics related to the benefits and challenges of being a virtual new hire, the social capital involved, and group and organizational culture. For benefits and challenges, frequency of those themes was counted with the assumption that the presence of themes can indicate importance.

Challenges

Interactions feel less personal
"The most challenging part is creating connections with people that I'm working with. It's harder to make a personal connection while on a screen."
Generation Z, manufacturing industry

Knowing availability of coworkers
"Always having to check my colleagues' calendars to see if they are free to help vs. having a quick conversation in passing. I will look at Google Calendar, and if someone's busy or in a meeting, I [need to] connect with another colleague to see if they are able to answer the question."
Millennial, healthcare industry

Sharing coordinated information
"Document management, edit management, and keeping information accurate and shared effectively among everyone who needs access [is challenging], because people don't use technology uniformly. Giving directions to people is difficult. [It takes] way more time to clarify things as people have questions and different needs—much more confusing than it would be working in the same space."
Millennial/Generation Z, government employee

Many inefficiencies
"People don't realize it usually, but there are a lot of inefficiencies using only online communication."
Generation X, manufacturing industry

Loneliness
"I feel disconnected and like I am on my own a lot…"
Millennial, technology industry

Benefits

Productive Focus Work
"Benefit of onboarding and working fully remote [gave the ability] to block out time to work heads down on something."
Millennial, technology industry

Easier Recharging
"…[allows] for downtime, which lets my brain rest for when I have more intense work to do. My dog is a stress reliever and can break up my day."
Millennial/Generation Z, government employee

Personal efficiencies
"I get more sleep without having to get up and drive."
Generation Z, manufacturing industry

Formal communication channels
"Meetings are shorter and more efficient. More efficient meetings waste less time and energy."
Generation X, manufacturing industry

Support
"[They] all care about you as a person. People do a better job when they feel appreciated. This team makes me feel that and makes me want to work harder."
Generation Z, food/beverage industry

Personal growth
"I've been able to grow and be self-sufficient by finding answers on my own. I take on the responsibility to resolve small issues."
Millennial, healthcare industry

Contributors

Beck Johnson holds a B.S. in Scientific and Technical Communication and an M.A. in Communication. With nearly 20 years of experience in social science research methodologies and as a Senior Research Specialist with the Workplace Research team at Haworth, she leads the Human Performance Lab. In this role, Beck and her team conduct primary and secondary research addressing workplace issues. Her goals are to build knowledge leading to solutions for workplace issues using empirical evidence, as well as to provide credible and relevant resources to clients.

Aaron Haworth holds a B.S. in History with a minor in Political Science from the Grand Valley State University Honors College, where he also served on the board of the Grand Valley Journal of History. As a Research Associate at Haworth, he conducts research addressing workplace issues focused on the well-being of the human worker.

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Haworth research investigates links between workspace design and human behavior, health and performance, and the quality of the user experience. We share and apply what we learn to inform product development and help our customers shape their work environments. To learn more about this topic or other research resources Haworth can provide, visit haworth.com.